

The Three-Legged Antisemitic Stool of Holocaust Denial: Illogic, Wilful Distortions, and Camouflaged Discourse¹

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When I learned that Holocaust denier David Irving was suing me for libel in the United Kingdom for having briefly described him in my book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* as a denier, an antisemite, and a racist, one of the first things I had to do was compose a list of expert witnesses whom my lawyers would enlist as members of the defence team. One of the first names that I put on the list was Christopher R. Browning. My lawyers immediately understood why. Browning had served as a crucial witness in the Zündel trial (1988). His masterful use of historical documents and data to demonstrate the bankruptcy of deniers' claims had played a crucial role in the guilty verdict Zündel received. Browning was one of the historians I wanted by my side. And, as it turned out, I was absolutely right. Joining him were Richard Evans, Robert Jan van Pelt, and Peter Longerich. Together they made up what the legal team used to call "our dream team" of historians.

As news of the pending trial (*David Irving v. Penguin Books Ltd and Deborah Lipstadt*) became public, many people marvelled at the fact that something so absurd as Holocaust denial could become the basis for a lawsuit.² While they appreciated the gravity of the situation – most, but not all, people understood that being sued for libel is a serious matter – they found it hard to believe that a court would let such a suit move forward.³ Their mantra was: "What court – especially the High Court in the United Kingdom – would take this guy and his absurd charges seriously?" Their surprise that I seemed poised to be falling down this unbelievable forensic rabbit hole felt familiar to me. Ever since I began working on the topic of denial in the late 1980s I had been encountering

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- 1 Limited portions of this chapter are drawn from my most recent book *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken, 2019).
 - 2 Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1993).
 - 3 There were those who, rather inexplicably, told me I should just "ignore it." As my lawyer Anthony Julius observed, "I guess they don't know one can't just choose to 'ignore' a lawsuit."

such reactions. I continuously had to explain to friends and colleagues why I was devoting my energies to it. Despite telling them that Professors Yehuda Bauer and Yisrael Gutman, two of the most well-respected historians in the field, had urged me to examine this topic, they were not persuaded. I continuously encountered variations on the following themes. "These people are dolts. They are the equivalent of flat-earth theorists. They probably think Elvis is alive. Forget about them. Go work on a serious topic." After Browning's testimony in the Zündel trial, I mentioned this to him. He understood the potential threat that deniers posed to the public's perception of the historical record. Moreover, he did not have to be convinced of the link between denial and antisemitism.

While some scholars, such as Browning, understood why I was studying this topic, I was not miffed at the doubters' disparagement of my choice. Ironically, I once had thought the same thing. In 1976, when I first heard about denial, I laughed out loud. Was Holocaust denial, I asked the person telling me about it, of any real significance? (That person was, in fact, Yehuda Bauer.) Certainly, I suggested, it was not something to be taken seriously. And, truth be told, even when I began my work on this topic some of those doubts lingered. Despite the fact that two prominent historians in our field had asked me to work on this because they thought it worthwhile, I periodically wondered if I were addressing an obscure phenomenon, that, however perverse or obscene it might be, had little existential importance. Deniers' claims seemed too phantasmagorical and absurd to be taken seriously. Whenever I was beset by these doubts, I would reassure myself that my excursion into this filed was to be momentary – maybe a matter of a couple of years – and then I ultimately would emerge from this dark orchard unscathed and ready to turn to other pursuits. I was wrong on two counts. This excursion would be far more than a momentary plunge. It would consume the better part of my academic career and involve me in a seven-year-long legal battle (That rabbit hole was far deeper than anyone initially imagined). And, more important, denial was well worth taking seriously.

After a couple of decades in this field I have come to the conclusion that denial is akin to a three-legged stool. One leg is a lack of logic, the kind that is endemic to conspiracy theories. The second leg is a wilful distortion and invention of evidence, which is also something endemic to conspiracy theories. The third leg is a *modus operandi* that conveniently disguises extremism, prejudice and racism in the form of rational discourse. The seat of this stool, the place from which all these other elements flow, is classic antisemitism, the ultimate conspiracy theory. Ultimately, Holocaust denial is rooted in or built upon a foundation of age-old antisemitic charges.